

OBITUARY

George Patterson (1920-2012)

Roger Croston

George Neilson Patterson, who has died aged 92, was a Scottish medical missionary who crossed the Himalaya in 1949 to warn the outside world of China's intention to invade Tibet. Unable to return after the Chinese takeover, Patterson became a special correspondent for the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*. During the first ten years of the Chinese occupation, 'Patterson of Tibet', as he became known, did more than any other to keep the world informed of the repression inflicted on the Tibetans, and he was indefatigable in trying to encourage international support for their cause.

One of three children of a strongly socialist coal miner, Patterson was born in Redding, Falkirk, Scotland on 19 August 1920 and raised in nearby Laurieston as a member of the strict Plymouth Brethren. In his memoir, *God's Fool* (1956), he recalled how, at the age of 17 when he was seriously ill, he had felt confronted by a Dostoyevskian choice between God and Marx. He decided to dedicate himself to God and to obey commands which, Patterson believed, God had revealed directly to him.

After leaving school aged 13, Patterson was apprenticed to the local Carron Engineering Co. where he worked on weapons production throughout World War Two. At war's end, when reading Sven Hedin's book *Trans-Himalaya*, he felt God instructing him to go to Tibet. Penniless, because he had donated all his savings to charity, he studied at the Missionary School of Medicine, London. In 1946 he and Geoffrey Bull, a fellow member of the Brethren, travelled to Shanghai, and then to the Sino-Tibetan border town of Tatsienlu (Kangting), whence they trekked westwards for a month with their belongings on 24 mules, to Poteu, in the Kham province of Tibet. There they decided to build a hospital and mission station. The province at the time was a no-man's land likened by Patterson to the Wild West. Here he chanced on a Khampa chieftain and merchant, born of Lhasa nobility, Topgyay Pangdatshang, a man surprisingly well versed in Karl Marx's dialectical materialism. He ran his own army and had done his utmost to wrench a measure of independence from the corrupt Kuomintang government.

Patterson mastered the Khampa language and customs and was befriended by Topgyay. At this time, Topgyay was planning a second major revolt, following a failed attempt in 1934, to overthrow the feudal central Tibetan government in Lhasa and replace it with a modernising, socialist secular regime, which would retain the Dalai Lama as religious but not temporal head.

Nobody, meanwhile, had anticipated the massing of the People's Liberation Army on the Sino-Tibetan border. When the communists demanded co-operation, in late 1949, Topgyay, who was determined to resist invasion, asked Patterson to make a perilous winter journey to India to seek military aid, supplies and international protection; a journey he intended making anyway in order to replenish his medical supplies for the Khampas' planned rebellious march on Lhasa. Furthermore, when 'the voice of God' told him that he should do what he could to help, Patterson felt he had no choice.

Although it was winter, he chose a route to Sadiyah, in northern Assam, a route along which no Westerner had travelled before and one that even Tibetans feared to cross. Leaving Geoffrey Bull behind in Poteu, he and three Tibetan soldiers made the three-month, 400-mile journey on horseback. Eventually arriving in Calcutta in March 1950, Patterson went to the British High Commission to relate his story, only to be met with blank stares and sniggers. He persisted and finally managed to meet the First Secretary who, taking him seriously, introduced him to intelligence officials from Britain, America and India; but at the height of the Korean War the requests for help from Topgyay (whom the British mistrusted anyway) were turned down.

Patterson decided to return to eastern Tibet, but a devastating earthquake, illness and the early arrival of the monsoon kept him in India while the communist invasion began in October. Instead, Patterson settled near to Tibet's southern border with India, where he travelled between the Indian hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Before long he started sending regular reports to the *Daily Telegraph* of terrible events taking place in Tibet, as related by the refugees fleeing into India.

Meanwhile, Bull was captured and imprisoned as a suspected spy. Held in solitary confinement he underwent 're-education' and 'thought reform'. His faith in God, however, kept him from breakdown, and three

years later he was released to the British authorities in Hong Kong. He published his story in *When Iron Gates Yield* in 1955.

In 1951, Patterson was asked by Topgyay's brother, Yangpel Pangdatshang, (Tibet's Minister of Trade), and the Dalai Lama's family, to help plot the Dalai Lama's escape into exile from southern Tibet. (The fact that Yangpel's two equally powerful brothers, Topgyay and Rapga, were plotting the overthrow of his government in Lhasa indicates the intricate complexity of Tibetan politics at that time). The Dalai Lama, only 16 years old, intended to flee but yielded to entreaties that he should consult the state oracle, who twice told him to return to Lhasa; thus, the planned escape was aborted. Four years later, however, Patterson helped the Dalai Lama's elder brother, Thubten Norbu, to escape to America.

During the 1950s, Patterson acted as a covert, unpaid messenger between the American administration and representatives of the Dalai Lama, whom the Americans were prepared to recognise as head of an 'autonomous Tibet'. Patterson warned the American negotiators that the Tibetan language made no distinction between the concepts of 'autonomy' and 'independence'. Consequentially, after the Dalai Lama actually fled in 1959, following a massive rebellion in Lhasa, there was widespread disappointment among Tibetan exiles when it became clear that western promises of support meant little in practice.

In his reports for the *Telegraph* and other publications, Patterson described the 'sullen, uncooperative, still rebellious populace and a ruthless Chinese occupation army determined to wipe out the Tibetan race by mass killings, transportation to forced labour camps, removal of thousands of children to China and confiscation of all wealth and property'. He was the first to tell the world about the abortive Lhasa uprising of 1959 and he chronicled the subsequent period of ruthless suppression by the Chinese, which was met by reckless acts of defiance by individual Tibetans.

On 17 March 1959, the Indian Government warned that it would be 'constrained to interdict his residence' if he did not stop sending 'misleading and exaggerated' reports. Nehru accused him of accepting 'bazaar rumours' as facts and stated 'there is no violence in Tibet.' Later that day, however, there was pandemonium in the Indian Parliament when Nehru was forced to announce that 'fighting had broken out in Lhasa and the Indian consulate was damaged by shelling.' Patterson's reports, in 1959

and 1960, of a build-up of Chinese troops along the Indian border were a factor that led to India hardening her stance towards China.

In 1961, Patterson returned to Britain, where he had a BBC radio programme series 'Asian Affairs in The British Press', and worked as a commentator and book reviewer. He became a Liberal candidate for the Edinburgh (West) constituency for the Westminster Parliament, but resigned without contesting an election. With David Astor, editor of the *Observer*, and others, he helped establish and became the first director of the 'International Committee for The Study of Group Rights', now 'Minority Rights Group International' (MRG), an organisation working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious, linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples.

In 1953, Patterson married a surgeon, Margaret 'Meg' Ingram, a member of The Church of Scotland and medical missionary to whom he had been introduced in Kalimpong. In 1964, they moved to Hong Kong where she was appointed surgeon-in-charge at Tung Wah Hospital. For the next nine years, Patterson used Hong Kong as a base for travelling throughout Asia, writing and broadcasting for regional and international media.

In 1964, Patterson, the British documentary film-maker Adrian Cowell and the cameraman Chris Menges, became the first Westerners to cross the border between Nepal and Tibet with the Khampa armed resistance. Claiming that they wanted to film scenes of Buddhist life, Patterson bluffed the team's way into the remote Dzum valley, a restricted area in northern Nepal where a small detachment of the guerrilla force was based. They travelled over a 20,000 foot pass into Tibet where they captured dramatic footage of a Khampa guerrilla attack on a Chinese convoy. Word got back to the CIA, who, furious at the lapse in security, sent orders that they be intercepted and relieved of their film before they could leave Nepal. However, Patterson was one step ahead and by the time the Nepalese police caught them, the film had already been sent on: all the authorities seized was a recording of a Himalayan cuckoo. Cowell's documentary 'Raid into Tibet' caused a sensation when it was shown on British television in 1966, winning the *Prix Italia* and providing Western audiences with the first glimpse of the continuing violent resistance to the Chinese occupation.

While in Hong Kong, Patterson worked for Radio Hong Kong and Rediffusion Television, scriptwriting and presenting current affairs

programmes. In 1966, he helped create and edit the commercial journal *Enterprise* for the Hong Kong Trade Development Corporation.

Patterson's wife, meanwhile, had discovered that electro-acupuncture analgesia (as applied for post-surgical pain control), could also significantly ameliorate the symptoms of opiate withdrawal. In 1973, the Pattersons returned to London so that she could pursue clinical and scientific investigation into the technique. Together, based at her clinic in Harley Street, they developed Neuro Electric Therapy (NET), into an internationally recognised drug treatment programme, publishing numerous articles and books. During the 1970s and 1980s, Meg Patterson undertook much research in the USA, where her family lived (George at this time acting as house keeper) and was credited with helping rock stars such as Eric Clapton, Keith Moon and Pete Townsend come off drugs. The Pattersons argued that psychiatrists failed to resolve the drug problem because they could not address spiritual factors involved in addiction, while ecclesiastics failed because they could not tackle political and social factors. Alongside the physical treatment, therefore, they offered spiritual counselling.

Patterson was the author of thirty books covering the story of Tibet and his own involvement with its liberation struggle, the purposes of God and the problem of drug addiction. Titles include *Tibetan Journey* (1954), *Gods Fool* (1956), *Up and Down Asia* (1958), *Tragic Destiny* (1959), *Tibet in Revolt* (1960), *Peking versus Delhi* (1963), *The Unquiet Frontier: Border tensions in the Sino-Soviet conflict* (1966), *Christianity in Communist China* (1969), *A Fool at Forty* (1970), *The China Paradox: Christ versus Marx* (1990), *Requiem for Tibet* (1990).

He returned once to Tibet, visiting Lhasa for the first time in 1987, as an adviser to a proposed Hollywood film about himself. However, to his disappointment, this metamorphosed into 'Seven Years in Tibet' – the story of Heinrich Harrer.

In 1999, Meg Patterson suffered a debilitating stroke and in 2001 she and George returned to Scotland and settled in the Auchlochan Trust, a retirement community for clergy and associates, in Lesmahagow near Glasgow. Meg died there in 2002. George continued to promote and take interest in her Neuro Electric Therapy until his life's end.

In recent years Patterson was pleased to see major reforms in China and the efforts made throughout Tibet to restore and preserve the country's

ancient culture. In 2007, he met Chinese academics from Beijing and spent three days with them talking about his role in Tibetan affairs. The discussions pleased him because of their frank, open and friendly honesty.

In 2011, aged 90, Patterson, 'the bearded Khamba' was presented with the Light of Truth Award by the International Campaign for Tibet (earlier recipients included Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel). On hearing that he had died, the Dalai Lama sent a personal message to Patterson's family expressing his sadness and gratitude for his work to raise awareness of the plight of the Tibetan people. George Patterson is survived by two sons and a daughter.

